

AMES 3xxx

Jinn, Ghosts, and Demons in Arabic Literature

Course Description

Jinn, also known as genies, are supernatural beings intrinsic to Islamic cosmology and culture: neither human nor divine, of our world but (usually) invisible to us. This course traces the trope of the jinni in Arabic literature: from the place of jinn in the Quran and Islamic tradition, through their role in the composition of the greatest poetry, to their reincarnation in modern works of literature. Following a survey of classic texts and contexts, the course examines the manner in which jinn are latched onto modern debates on personal and collective trauma, memory, madness, relations between East and West (or North and South), political and state violence, gender relations and hierarchies, and virtual realities.

Liberal education requirements:

Gaining critical literacy in diverse cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education: it denaturalizes one's given context and offers a basis for thinking comparatively of the variety of meaning-making systems that humans have elaborated. In this course, students will engage with the globally influential literary and theological tradition of the jinn, through firsthand engagement with diverse sources.

To this end, the course meets the following SLOs:

Understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies: By the end of the semester, students will be familiar with a wide historical and geographical trajectory concerning Jinn beliefs and literary manifestations, including Islamic cosmology, vernacular practices, poetic traditions, and modern literature and mass media. Students will Jinn form an essential part of vernacular cultures in North Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and India, and travel across the world through textual/visual media or migrant communities. They will also be familiar with the canonical literary genres of Islamic cultures, including the Quran, hadith (sayings and practices of the prophet), classical poetry, and sufi allegory, as well as modern genres such as Arabic novels, memoirs, and popular media.

Understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression: While the first weeks of the course are dedicated to pre-modern Arab and Islamic cultures, starting from week 6 the students will examine how modern Arab writers and artists evoke and utilize the pre-modern figures in order to address issues such as trauma, memory, madness, relations between East and West (or North and South), and political violence. Students will learn to identify creative practices reclamation, citation, and evocation in innovative new genres, and the manner in which such practices make literature into a means of political expression.

SLO Assessment:

The syllabus includes writing assignments of various formats, through which the students will demonstrate their understanding of literary technique (translation analysis), their familiarity with specific texts (comparative analysis) and their ability to position materials within their theological, cultural, and political contexts (longer research paper). The students will also participate in class discussion and deliver in-class presentations of individual or group work.

This 3 credit course will be offered every year. There are no pre-requisites, and all texts are read in English. Films are available with English subtitles.

Meeting Literature Core Criteria:

This course examines how the figure of the jinn – pre-Islamic fantastical beings – appear in Arabic and Islamic literary traditions over a period of almost than 1,500 years. The materials include numerous literary genres: religious texts such as the Quran, classical and modern poetry, testimonies collected by ethnographers, Sufi allegories, novels, memoirs, and visual media such as films and TV shows. The course examines the political and historical contexts of these works, highlighting the persistence of the figure of the Jinn over time and inquiring into the various roles it is called to fulfill. The focus on one trope and the way it transforms across histories, geographies, and genres allows class discussions to center on the manner in which literary form shapes meaning and effect. Over the course of the semester we discuss how different genres allow writers to achieve different goals in a variety of political contexts. For example, with a novel like *Frankenstein in Baghdad* we examine the writer's evocation of a canonical text (Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*), wedding it to local traditions of the supernatural in order to create a powerful allegory of war-torn Baghdad in the 2000s. In a cluster of poetic, memoirist, and visual works about Palestine we observe how the figure of the ghost allows writers to address a state of exile, war, and haunting trauma.

Throughout the semester the students engage in class discussion, work in small groups to analyze materials and present them to the class, and submit writing assignments in which they develop their own original analysis of literary texts supported by research on their historical context. The course has no prerequisite and assumes no prior knowledge of Islamic cultures or experience with literary analysis. The order of the assignments is designed so that each one develops new skills gradually: the translation comparison analysis fosters an attention to the nuances of language and their effect. The comparative essay develops awareness of formal as well as narrative differences and their meaning. The final research essay relies on both these skills, adding the demand to formulate a contextualized argument.

Meeting Global Perspectives Theme Criteria:

(1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world:
Every culture has its own tradition of the fantastic or supernatural, a realm out of the reach of human control or understanding that is often a reflection of, and a means of reflecting on, social relations and structures. This class introduces students to the

supernatural tradition of the Jinn in Arab and Islamic cultures extending from Morocco to India, in conjunction with readings and discussions on madness, memory, personal and collective trauma, colonialism, relations between East and West (or North and South), political and state violence, gender relations and hierarchies, and virtual realities. The students are encouraged to consider the texts as ethical interventions within specific political and historical contexts. Throughout the course we reflect on how literary devices such as metaphor, fiction, allegory, and allusion allow writers to reflect on complex global challenges in sophisticated and creative ways.

(2) reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community;

Class discussions on the fantastic and the non-human necessarily generate conversations on what it means to be human, who/what is excluded from this category, and how to live in a human society. Furthermore, ghosts, demons, and specters allow us to reflect on the manner histories and injustices are narrated, processed, and persist into the present. The figure of the Jinn as evoked by writers such as Ibrahim al-Koni, who writes of nomadic people in Libya, or Radwa Ashour, who considers political censorship of archives in Egypt, allow us to think of marginalized communities and of forms of communality that have been repressed and forgotten in modern state-sanctioned narratives. The students are encouraged to think comparatively of marginalized American histories, such as experiences of slavery and oppression, and the way that American writers like Tony Morrison have also used archives of the supernatural to reflect upon them. This comparative resonance allows the students to consider how every society uses fiction and invention to imagine justice, or to comprehend injustice. Eventually we consider how the idea of living with the jinn, as a mode of living with an absolute Other, can become a metaphor for constructing new modes of collectivity grounded in difference rather than sameness.

(3) Connecting knowledge and practice:

Through discussion, group work, and writing assignments, the course regularly invites students to engage directly with texts and to put them in conversation with larger social and historical contexts that pertains directly to their lives, such as migration, cultural imperialism, personal and collective trauma, and the definitions of madness and normalcy. Furthermore, in their final project the students are invited to present their findings in a form that they find to be best fitting for the material: a podcast, a website, a video, or a more traditional paper. In this manner the students are invited to think about audience, about modes of presenting knowledge, and about the ramifications of their work beyond the classroom context.

(4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

The course materials regularly highlight the role of creativity and invention in coding, comprehending, and intervening in history. While the geopolitical context of the texts might not be familiar to many of the students, understanding how fantastic worlds are often a means to ethically reflect on issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, and economic inequalities within particular contexts makes them aware of their own historical position and agency. Furthermore, the course's attention to translation,

transmission, and the entanglements of global histories encourages the students to consider their own positions and modes of agency and access.